

The Most Ven. Aggamahapandita Madihe Pannasiha Mahanayaka Thera - An Appreciation

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The most Venerable Madihe Pannasiha Mahanayaka Thera is no more with us. The country, irrespective of caste creed differences, mourned his death a few years ago. Since then, over the carpet of time, of whatever colour that may be, years have rolled on. We witness today many disastrous things happening in this little island of Sri Lanka. Diabolic forces of Evil have been unleashed and are at work both on the lives of people and institutions in Sri Lanka. Lawlessness and anarchy have descended upon our land. In this situation, my memory brings back to me a few lines of poetry which I had read more than sixty years ago as a young student.

I prayed to God who never heard.

My desperate soul grew numb.

The life long wish and prayer of our revered late prelate was 'Peace on earth and goodwill among men'. He was not preaching it from the pulpit of a distant church somewhere. In upholding that policy, he was no more and no less than a son of the Buddha [*Buddha-putta* or *Sakyaputtiya-samana*]. The Buddha had always preached *Sukhino va khemino hontu sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta* = May all life everywhere be safe and secure. May they all enjoy happiness and comfort.

Mind you, our Mahanayaka Thera knew well enough the socio-political identity of Sri Lanka. He knew perfectly well the demographic details of the island in which he was born. They were at his finger tips. He knew every bit of the

ethnic distribution of people in this island, where they were and how they came to be there. He could not be fooled about 'traditional homelands', not even by the top brass of the day. He taught the political leaders of all ages and all brands in this country that as far back as the 5th century A.D. the Chinese traveler Fa Hsien who visited us here in Sri Lanka, referred to this country as the Land of the Lion People or Shih tse Kuo. The tragedy was that his words fell on deaf ears. This was perhaps due to an inherited national malaise of 'never listen to another.' Unfortunately, the nation is now called upon to pay too high a price for this incorrigible political deafness of our leaders.

To refresh the memory of what the Mahanayaka Thera delivered to the nation as a message of political philosophy throughout his life: 'Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic multi-religious land where people had learnt to live in peace and harmony. They had done so for centuries, respecting each other's relative rights and privileges'. He maintained that economic, social and cultural considerations of this country did not justify the division of this little island into pieces on any basis. His one and only prayer for every one us Sri Lankans was **territorial integrity**. World history, he insisted, was daily proving the disastrous consequences of such political maneuvering for dividing of land for ethnic groups through international aiding and abetting all around us.

But disastrously, block-power of political leadership in this country, not wisdom, has always had the bigger say on their side. Consequently, what needs to happen has happened. Everybody now has equally well to pay the price for it.

For nearly a decade now the world has been trying to see the truth of **Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft**. But we are sorry wise statesmanship of Sri Lanka has already drained off its last drop of religion into the Black Sea of Politics. We pray 'Glory be to these generations of political leaders of this country'. With all of them, religion remained the never-used handkerchief in the upper pocket of their political shirts. May their souls rest in peace. R.I.P. But let us not forget that in the world today religion is still being

used by shrewder men as a carrier of political ideologies across the globe.

Equally zealous was our magnanimous prelate in creating a generation of young disciples from among the bhikkhus to carry forward the torch of Buddhist learning, both within this country and the world outside. With the unstinted support of his younger strong arm of Venerable Ampitiye Rahula Maha Thera, now almost in his nineties, the Mahānāyaka Thera established for this purpose the Siri Vajiragnana Dharmayatanaya of Maharagama for the education of younger monks in the Dhamma and the Vinaya in conformity to the traditional norms of the Sasana. He threw it open to all sects or *nikayas* in the island. Its educational policies, we know, need to be kept up-dated and religiously robust all the time. In the revered memory of the founder, its lay supporters enthusiastically look up to the fulfillment of those wishes. But good intentions alone, do not always suffice. Vigilance and vigor must keep pace together all the time.

During these last few years, the absence of the Mahanayaka Thera has been felt in many areas of life. For more than half his life time of over ninety years, he was the Mahānāyaka Thera of the Amarapura Maha Nikaya. As we look back on this vast stretch of time during which his dominant presence was felt through the length and breadth of this little island of Sri Lanka, we often feel that many crisis situations of recent times in our country could have been averted with his wisdom and judgement. May his upward ascent in his spiritual journey be swift and smooth, with never a look back on what he has left behind.

It is with a deep sense of grief in my heart that I talk to you on this occasion of the passing away of our Mahanayaka Thera. Please permit me to address a few words to you in English. I know my Sinhala alright. But I wish to reach a more representative gathering of our listeners and our reading public. I am deeply grieved for more reasons than one. He is eight years my senior and I have known him for more than seventy years of my life. In 1990, when at the age of seventy, I sought ordination under him as a monk, I had the good luck to have him appointed as my preceptor or Senior Tutor.

In my younger days, both as a student at the University in the early forties and as a teacher at the University thereafter, I have very closely known his impeccable religiousness and his very deep sense of national consciousness. It is true to say that he rose much above the expectations of his erudite teacher, the very renowned Pelene Siri Vajiranana Mahanayaka Thera who had built up the then well sought-after edifice of the Vajiraramaya at Bambalapitiya. As a young student at the then known University College, I did myself benefit a great deal through my close associations with him. We need no historians, from within the universities or outside, to tell us that some of the well-groomed statesmen of the day, no matter to whatever degree they perfected themselves, like Dudley Senanayake, J. R. Jayewardene, S.W.R.D. Bandaranayake grew to stature under the tutelage of that great mentor, Pelene Siri Vajiranana. They do not appear to have learned everything they needed. These great men of the day, we recollect with great lament as we look around today, always felt they had something more to learn from such sources of religious inspiration than what they knew.

Placed in the midst of that holy of holies at Vajiraramaya, the young Pannasiha theravada was growing up to be a sharp and brilliant student of Buddhism. He was also becoming an expert on the statistics of every area of his interests, changes in demographic patterns, utilization of human resources, land development and the economy of the land etc. etc.

To this brilliant young Pannasiha theravada Buddhism was well and truly the national and cultural heritage which Sri Lanka had inherited from its large-hearted good neighbour of North India. Buddhism had immensely enriched nearly the whole of Asia, more than two thousand years ago, including Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq in the west, the whole of Mongolia in the north, China, Korea and Japan in the Far East and many regions of South Asia, to name only a few. I respect him highly as a thorough student of the history of this area. He has had and maintained more than Professorial standing in the subject, I assure you.

It has been a national tragedy, caused often by ill informed political theorists of mushroom-like origin that the Mahanayaka Thera has been branded at times a racist. The greater tragedy in his own life had been that he had stepped in to play the role of the indispensable Defender of the Faith for Buddhism when the current rulers of Sri Lanka failed time and again to possess the necessary vim and vigour for that task. It is indeed a stupid usage of the neo-social-scientists to use the scandalous word Chauvinism in association with him. We forgive them, for they know not what they do, not even what they say.

But his genuine interest in the social and cultural well being of the people of this land is evident in many areas of the life activities of our Nayaka Thera. As a serious student of Buddhism, he firmly believed in the dictum as laid down in Buddhism that alcohol, served to humans as an accompaniment to social elitism in five star hotels in the city on days of festivity or in the magul maduva in the village, or served to gods with a religious sanction to win special favours from them were equally despicable and equally degrading. From very early years of his life he joined one of the country's foremost temperance workers, namely the Most Venerable Kalukondayave Pannasekera Nayaka Thera. In the more recent years, I do remember going with him to the Mahaveli Development zones, like the Dehi Atta Kandiya, and visiting individual homes and advising village farmers not to wastefully spend their hard earned money on the very high class popular alcohol which are being continually produced locally and generously supplied on a weekly basis by the ingenious metropolitan business tycoons.

Even in these urgently needed reformist moves, government after government, the Mahanayaka Thera was extremely gentle, even to a point of erring in the eyes of many veteran social reformists. Undeniably, that was his right to be what he was. We must necessarily bow down before him and leave it at that. We guess that it was due to this inborn gentleness that was of his that he never wished to push his reforms to any convincing end, resulting in conflict or violence. I have sat with him on many occasions when he has silently accepted

the defense positions put forward by eminent state personalities on many vital state issues, himself knowing fully well the lack of honesty within them and the evils of their defenses. Unfortunately, being a monk full of self-awareness from his very young days, he never exhibited the force and firmness which a meaningful opposition needs to possess. This directly implies, as we think in Buddhist terms, non-employment of force or *avyapada*, which immediately shuts out violence or *avihimsa*. This immediately clarifies why he did not choose, as a Buddhist monk, to take directly to politics.

Besides, he would have well and truly known the unmistakable position assigned in the religion to the true and self-developing Buddhist monk in the arena of statecraft, within our own religious frame work, for the correction and guidance of erring rulers. It occurs in the Digha Nikaya in the Cakkavattisihanada Suttanta [DN. III. P. 61]. Both among rulers and the ruled, the monks and laymen, those who have not set their eyes on it yet, do need to read it. This current need in the world today to blend a little bit of religious thinking into the machinery of statecraft is witnessed in the production of a book like Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft by the Oxford University Press in 1994. This is the crying need of sensible good government in the world today. Not the right of believed-to-be one mighty government to blast up another, looking out for plausible reasons.

Establish justice in the land is the first requirement: *ma te tata vijite adhammakaro pavattittha*. Neither the rulers nor the ruled shall be perpetrators of crime and injustice in the land. As for guidance in this direction, the rulers are called upon to recognize the cultural propensity of the land. This is where the demographic pattern seriously matters. The political leaders are required to go the religious men of depth and honest understanding of their religiousness, not mere hereditary title-holders. These religious men themselves must be bent on self reform [*ekam attanam damenti ekam attanam samenti...*]. Thereupon the rulers must do as the religious men bid them to do. This is the healthy

combination of Religion and the State which Buddhism anticipates. In Sri Lanka today, neither the Universities nor Monastic Institutions of Higher Learning ever teach these about these areas of study. Not even the so-called Graduate Schools which are rapidly increasing in number.

The late Mahanayaka Thera has set blazing many such trails. The number of monks, both old and young, to handle these with success is the urgent need of the day. The Sri Lankan Buddhist clergy needs to be welded together on these vital national issues. The Mahanayaka Thera is no longer with us. He is now in the world of the dead. Please, I request you, do not pray for his return, He does not wish us to keep flowers at his clay feet with unflinching regularity as a part of religious ritual. Let those of us who are yet living, and those who are to be born in this country after us, remember what he strove for -- for the restoration and consolidation of our more than twenty three century old culture of this land which is unassailably high by all international standards. Let the living awaken to life from their slumber and keeping this in their forefront, march forward for victory in their unmistakable battle, if there is anything worth saving in this land.

Roaring your Lion's Roar of Wisdom, O hero
May you soon reach your blissful goal of Nibbana.

*Bahunnam vata atthaya mata janayi uttamam imam
Abhikkama mahapanna siho'va padam accutam.*